

Did Wittgenstein think that Robinson Crusoe and Tarzan are able to follow rules?

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1. Introduction

Commentators differ in function that interactions between people ('intersubjectivity') plays in Wittgenstein's conception of language. There are broadly two camps. The so-called 'individualists' think that, for an individual to mean something by an utterance, it is sufficient that there are 'public' criteria for determining what she means (i.e. that it is manifested in her behaviour) such that, in principle, another person could understand her (even if there is no such person). For the individualists then, it is the logical *possibility* of intersubjectivity that is required for language.

The 'communitarians', however, think that intersubjectivity has more of a role to play than this. They reject the view that it is enough that there are public criteria for determining whether an isolated individual is using language or not – for them, language is essentially social. The reasons why they take this view differ between communitarians but, in broad terms, the thought is that an individual must be embedded in a social context to be able to use language meaningfully.¹

Wittgenstein thought that language use is a rule-governed activity, and the question is therefore often framed as whether a single individual is capable of following a rule. It's clear that Wittgenstein thought that rule-following is a custom, a practice: that something that only one person does, on only one occasion, is not what we call "following a rule".² The individualists claim that Wittgenstein thought that an isolated individual can establish a practice – invent the notion of following a rule – by doing the same thing on a number of occasions; the 'communitarians' claim that not only multiple applications but also multiple persons are required for setting up a practice.

The debate is often illustrated using the fictional case of Robinson Crusoe. Defoe's Crusoe was, of course, an individual raised in English society, trained in the use of the English language, and then (when an adult) shipwrecked on a desert island (i.e. physically isolated from other human beings) for 26 years. It is asked whether Crusoe, on his island, is able to follow a rule – say by drawing arrows in the sand to point the way to a food source. The philosophical literature also uses an adaptation of Defoe's story as a thought experiment: the so-called 'born Crusoe', who somehow grows up in isolation from all human contact and is never trained in the use of a language. For a variety of reasons, I will exemplify this thought experiment with another fictional character, Tarzan, who was

¹ More will be said later about different versions of the so-called 'community view'.

² "It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on. – To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions)." §199. References to sections (§) are to those of *PI* unless otherwise stated.

orphaned in infancy and raised to adulthood by apes.³ So we may also ask whether a 'Tarzan' is able to follow a rule, to use language.

Commentators are virtually unanimous in their agreement that a Crusoe is able to follow rules, though some communitarians point out that – in making that judgement – we are treating Crusoe as part of our community and applying our criteria of rule-following to him. However, individualists claim that a Tarzan can follow a rule – by exhibiting his understanding of the rule in his behaviour – whereas communitarians argue that such a radically isolated individual cannot be said to follow rules. I will defend a version of the 'community view', that Wittgenstein thought that our practices of following rules are using language are characteristically social institutions. He did not therefore think that a radically isolated individual (Tarzan) could develop the understanding and intentions that are crucial to rule-following. I will also argue that Wittgenstein thought that a Crusoe is able to follow rules only to the extent that we can see him as remaining embedded within a social context.

In discussing these issues, I'll concentrate on Wittgenstein's later writings (particularly the *Philosophical Investigations*) and the focus will be primarily exegetical – on establishing what Wittgenstein thought about these issues. However, I'll also comment on the merits of what I take to be Wittgenstein's position and arguments. In a sense, this is an invidious task – for putting Wittgenstein's thoughts into the form of a structured argument is something that Wittgenstein himself was unable to do.⁴ It is hoped that the reader will therefore adopt a forgiving attitude towards the inevitably selective nature of my exegesis.

2. Wittgenstein's conceptions of philosophy and language

It's important to locate these issues in the context of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. He thought that traditional philosophical questions arise from a failure to understand how our language works, and his aim was to show that a proper understanding of language enables us to reject those questions (rather than to try to answer them).⁵ The task of philosophy is to describe how we actually

³ I use the example of Tarzan primarily for the avoidance of confusion. However, I also hope that using this example rather than that of the 'born Crusoe' will assist us in forming intuitions about this case, by helping us to imagine what such a person might really be like. I am, of course, aware that Tarzan – unlike a 'born Crusoe' – was not raised in isolation from all other *creatures*, but by a tribe of apes who might even have possessed a modicum of society. I hope that this difference will be useful when we come to consider the nature of 'practices'.

⁴ "...it seemed to me essential that in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence. After several attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realised that I should never succeed." (*PI* preface p.1).

⁵ To the *philosophical* question "Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its constituent parts?" the correct answer is: "That depends on what you understand by 'composite'." (And that, of course, is not an answer to, but a rejection of, the question.)" §47.

use language, and the only answer that we can give to a philosophical question like “what is justice?” is to describe the various ways in which we use the word “justice” in our everyday activities.⁶

Wittgenstein thought this description was best achieved by examining the various “language-games” of which natural languages are made up. Wittgenstein’s master metaphor is of language as a game, like chess – emphasising that it is an activity, a form of behaviour: something that we do.⁷ The words of our language are like pieces of a game (e.g. the king in chess), and spoken or written sentences are like moves in the game. And, like a game, language not only has rules but also a point – a purpose, a goal – just as the goal of chess is checkmate. Different language-games have different goals: the language-game of ‘ordering’ is used to get another person to do what you want; the goal of the ‘reporting’ language game is to convey information; the goals of the joke language-game are to make someone laugh, to hurt someone, to make a point; and so on. Sometimes words are uttered for purposes where the fact that the sound being made is a *word* is incidental.⁸ These goals are part of the context in which a word is used, and inform the meaning of the word as used in that context.

So our words do not have fixed meanings, but rather take their meaning from the context, the language-game, in which they are used.⁹ Philosophical problems arise when we take a word out of the language-game in which it is at home (i.e. where it has a use, a meaning) and try to use it *with that meaning* in a different language-game.¹⁰ Many of our concept words are what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblance” terms: they do not have a common essence, but are rather characterised by similarities, affinities – like those between members of an extended family. Wittgenstein thought that it is mistake to search for the *essence* of language: for the common property (or set of properties) that all of the phenomena that we call language share and which licenses us to apply the word “language” to those phenomena.¹¹ Our search should instead be for the “humble” uses of the word, and our aim to produce an “overview” of those uses.¹²

⁶ “All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place.” §109; “Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it...It leaves everything as it is.” §124.

⁷ “I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a “language-game.” §7.

⁸ For example, the utterance of the word “kabaddi” to show that the player’s breath is being held during the game of the same name (Rundle (2001) p.100).

⁹ “And this can be expressed as follows: I use the name “N” without a fixed meaning. Should it be said that I’m using a word whose meaning I don’t know, and so am talking nonsense? – Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing how things are.” §79.

¹⁰ “For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*...” §38; “When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition / sentence”, “name” – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home?” §116.

¹¹ “We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language...Whereas, in fact, if the words “language”... have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”.” §97.

¹² “A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have an *overview* of the use of our words.” §122.

As with a game, language use is a rule-governed activity.¹³ Not just any combination of words will do, just as not every movement of a chess piece is a valid ‘move’ in chess. The use of a word is not “unregulated”: it is governed by rules, and this is the case even though the rules do not cater for every circumstance.¹⁴ Word uses can be graded for ‘normality’: they can be more or less “normal” or “abnormal”,¹⁵ “strange”,¹⁶ or “secondary”;¹⁷ and this depends on the context of application, the language-game in which they are used.¹⁸ Language use has a normative element: there are correct and incorrect uses of words, and our set of linguistic rules or ‘grammar’ determines which uses of words make sense and which are nonsensical, which moves are allowed and which disallowed.

Rules, however, do not play the role in language use that they might first appear to: there is a gulf between the expression of a rule (e.g. a sign) and the activity of following it. We often act without having any rule-formulation before us (whether as a physical object or a mental image) and, in this sense, rules play a role in explaining our actions rather than guiding them. Even when we do have a rule-formulation before us, it is unclear how it could tell us what to do – as any expression of a rule may be interpreted in a number of different ways.¹⁹ And our rules do not cater for every conceivable circumstance, but only for the ‘normal’ situations that they’re designed to deal with (linked to the purposes of the activities, the language-game, which they regulate).²⁰

Wittgenstein thought that the gulf between a rule and its application could be bridged by shifting our focus from the expression of a rule (the rule-formulation) to the activity or ‘practice’ of following it.²¹ To grasp a rule is not to interpret it, but rather to *act* in a certain way; and we manifest our understanding of a rule in the way that we respond to it, and the explanations that we give for our actions. To apply a rule correctly is to perform the actions that we call “following the rule”, and to apply it incorrectly (or not at all)²² is to *do* what we call “going against it”.²³ Whether someone has

¹³ “Following according to the rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game.” *RFM* VI-28 p.330.

¹⁴ “But then the use of the word is unregulated – the ‘game’ we play with it is unregulated.” – It is not everywhere bounded by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one may throw a ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too.” §68.

¹⁵ “It is only in normal cases that the use of a word is clearly laid out in advance for us; we know, are in no doubt, what we have to say in this or that case. The more abnormal the case, the more doubtful it becomes what we are to say.” §142.

¹⁶ “And we can also say the word “this” to the object, as it were *address* the object as “this” – a strange use of this word, which perhaps occurs only when philosophizing.” §38.

¹⁷ “We do indeed say of an inanimate thing that it is in pain: when playing with dolls, for example. But this use of the concept of pain is a secondary one.” §282.

¹⁸ “But in a fairy tale a pot too can see and hear!” (Certainly; but it *can* also talk.)” §282.

¹⁹ §201.

²⁰ §§80, 142.

²¹ “Following a rule is a human activity. I give the rule an extension.” *RFM* VI-29; “...following a rule is a practice.” §202.

²² Wittgenstein did not think that there was a clear boundary between the two: “Notice, however that there is no sharp distinction between a random and a systematic mistake. That is, between what you are inclined to call a “random” and what a “systematic” one.” §143.

²³ “For what we thereby show is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call “following the rule” and “going against it”.” §201.

‘followed a rule’ is a judgement that we make from observing that person’s behaviour – it is a “physiognomy”.²⁴ This is why rule-following is essentially public: without someone’s understanding of a rule being manifested in their public behaviour, there would be no criterion for determining whether that person had understood it correctly (i.e. in accordance with our practice).²⁵

Wittgenstein thought that these considerations about rule-following had important implications for how we understand the contents of our own minds. Wittgenstein’s famous ‘private language argument’ concludes that there is no such thing as a ‘private’ language i.e. one that only I can possibly understand, as its words refer to my inner thoughts, feelings etc. Such a ‘language’ would not be normative: there would be no way to determine whether or not I had used its words correctly. This is for two reasons: firstly, no other person would be able to make that judgement (by hypothesis, as only I can understand the language); and, secondly, I’m unable to distinguish between what *seems* correct and what *is* correct.²⁶ The words that we use to describe and express our thoughts, feelings, sensations etc., therefore, get their meaning from correlations between linguistic and (public) non-linguistic behaviour – not from correlations between linguistic behaviour and our mental contents.²⁷ We have no extra-linguistic grasp of our own experiences, but rather those experiences are structured by our (public) language.

3. Following a rule and ‘practices’

I’ve already briefly outlined that Wittgenstein thought that what we call “following a rule” is to be described by shifting our focus from the expression of a rule to the activity or ‘practice’ of following rules. Wittgenstein clearly thought that following a rule is a practice.²⁸ But what exactly is a practice, and what are its key ingredients? The answers to these questions will go a long way to helping us to decide whether or not a Crusoe or a Tarzan could follow rules.

The starting point is that a ‘practice’ is an established way of seeing and responding to our environment, and the aggregate of our human practices is part of what Wittgenstein calls our “form

²⁴ “From this you can see how much there is to the physiognomy of what we call “following a rule” in everyday life.” §235; “((Meaning – a physiognomy))” §568.

²⁵ “This explanation of a word, like any other, he might understand rightly, wrongly, or not at all. And he will show which by his use of the word, in this as in other cases.” §288.

²⁶ “But “I commit it to memory” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *correctly* in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘correct’.” §258.

²⁷ This is the point of §270, in which the so-called ‘private diarist’ of §258 correlates the sign ‘S’ that he makes in his diary with a manometer reading – and not with the ‘sensation’ that S supposedly denotes.

²⁸ §202.

of life”.²⁹ It is what we, as competent practitioners, do in a particular situation “as a matter of course”.³⁰ Wittgenstein illustrates this with the following example:

“I see a picture; it represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick. – How? Might it not have looked just the same if he had been sliding downhill in that position? Perhaps a Martian would describe the picture so. I don’t need to explain why we don’t describe it so.”³¹

We see this picture as a man going uphill because that is how we go uphill, and we tend to go downhill by facing forwards not backwards. That is our practice, and perhaps other creatures might have a different practice in this situation – and might therefore see the picture differently. For example, Martians might walk backwards rather than forwards – so might look at the picture and see a Martian descending a hill. But Wittgenstein’s point it is not that we run through all the possible interpretations of the picture and then choose one, as we would pictures in a portfolio, but that we see it in this way automatically or “as a matter of course”.³² We follow the rule “blindly”.³³

What is the relationship between a rule-formulation and a practice? We feel that a rule *compels* us, forces a particular application on us. But this is at most a *psychological* and not a *logical* compulsion: a rule-formulation (picture) suggests something to us, but it is also possible to see it differently.³⁴ The origin of this illusion of logical compulsion is that only one use of the rule and no other occurred to us.³⁵ To apply a picture incorrectly is to do so in an unexpected way:

“Can there be a clash between picture and application? Well, they can clash in so far as the picture makes us expect a different use; because people in general apply *this* picture like *this*.

I want to say: we have a *normal* case and abnormal cases.”³⁶

So a rule-formulation may be applied in various different ways – to apply it incorrectly (to create a “clash”) is to apply it abnormally i.e. otherwise than in accordance with our practice. We do not all agree because there is a rule; rather, it is because we all agree in our actions that there is something

²⁹ Together with general facts about us and our environment, e.g. that we walk upright on two limbs and need to breathe air in order to survive, that the earth rotates on its axis creating light and dark periods, and so on.

³⁰ §238.

³¹ §139n(b). See also the case in which “it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip.” §185.

³² §238. Regularities may be shaped by physical factors (for example, constancy in particular properties of objects allows measurements), biology (for example, moving to avoid a projectile), training (for example, continuing a numerical series), culture (for example, clapping at the end of a performance), and so on.

³³ §219.

³⁴ §139.

³⁵ §140.

³⁶ §141.

that we're prepared to recognise as a rule.³⁷ So action comes first and, if there is sufficient agreement in that action, a rule might be cited to explain that action.³⁸

I will argue that there are five key interwoven characteristics of practices: training, regularity, understanding and intention, normativity and attitude. I'll deal with each of these in turn.

(a) *Training*

How does a practice, a regular 'matter of course' way of acting, come about? Wittgenstein clearly thought that training is relevant to our notion of a practice:

"... "So is whatever I do compatible with the rule? – Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a signpost – got to do with my actions? What sort of connection obtains here? – Well, this one, for example: I have been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now I do so react to it." ³⁹

Wittgenstein here notes that training is one way of bringing about a connection between a rule-formulation and an action. But, in the second paragraph of this remark, he distinguishes mere causal connections from practices:

"But with this you have pointed out only a causal connection; only explained how it has come about that we now go by the signpost; not what this following-the-sign really consists in. Not so; I have further indicated that a person goes by a signpost only in so far as there is an established usage, a custom."⁴⁰

A mere trained response to a stimulus (like Pavlov's dogs salivating on hearing a bell ring) is not what we call "following a rule".⁴¹ Not all sounds that humans make which bring about effects are called "language": utterances of nonsensical strings of words, such as "Milk me sugar!",⁴² may

³⁷ "Mathematical truth isn't established by their all agreeing that it's true – as if they were witnesses of it. *Because* they all agree in what they do, we lay it down as a rule." *LFM* 107f., quoted in Baker & Hacker (2009) p.175.

³⁸ Wittgenstein regularly quoted Goethe: "In the beginning was the deed".

³⁹ §198.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Also: "How is what I do connected with these words? (But I don't mean: causally connected.) Well, only by way of a general practice." *MS* 165, 78-80, quoted in Baker & Hacker (2009) p.175.

⁴¹ I'm grateful to David Levy for pointing out that that "Abrichtung" (training) may also be translated as "conditioning" and it applies to (non-human) animals as well as humans.

⁴² "When I say that the orders "Bring me sugar!" and "Bring me milk!" have a sense, but not the combination "Milk me sugar!", this does not mean that the utterance has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it an order to stare at me and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce." §498.

produce a desired effect but are excluded from “the sphere of language”.⁴³ But Wittgenstein thought that human learning could accomplish more than just a reflex action:

“I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*. ”⁴⁴

So our concept of teaching, in the human context, includes the capacity to understand – to learn a new perspective, a way of seeing things – like seeing the old man as walking up the hill.

Furthermore, a sound, sign or mental image is only a “rule-formulation” because we treat it as one as part of our practice of following rules. Imagine a tribe who mark the way to their settlement by planting a tree at each junction of a path – the position of the tree, say, indicates which direction to take. Someone from a neighbouring tribe, unacquainted with the practice of marking routes in this way, wouldn’t necessarily be able to identify the trees *as signposts* (indeed, that may be the very purpose of using this system). Only a person familiar with this practice would know that the trees were signposts, and the practice also tells that person how to react to the signpost. So what come first are our practices, our established ways of acting – and rules only arise from within a practice. As Wittgenstein puts it:

“The arrow points only in the application that a living being makes of it.”⁴⁵

It seems clear that our actual practices are partially inculcated by training, as a result of which (given our natural endowments) we learn to respond to particular situations in conventional ways. Robert Fogelin bases his version of the ‘community view’ on this point.⁴⁶ Fogelin’s view is that, as a matter of fact, human beings come to follow rules only through being trained by others who already grasp those rules. This means, for Fogelin, that language is not necessarily social but only contingently so. As we can imagine a ‘skill pill’, which an isolated child could swallow and thereby instantly become a rule-follower, it is logically possible that following a rule does not require training. Therefore, it seems reasonable to surmise that Fogelin would answer our question by saying that Crusoe is capable of following rules, as he has been trained in various (human) practices; but Tarzan (contingently) cannot, because there was no human to teach him how to do so.⁴⁷

⁴³ “To say “This combination of words has no sense” excludes it from the sphere of language.” §499.

⁴⁴ §144.

⁴⁵ §454.

⁴⁶ Fogelin (1987) pp.175-9,185.

⁴⁷ This brings out an important difference between the Tarzan and ‘born Crusoe’ examples, for it may be that Tarzan had been trained in the practices of the apes, inculcated in their ‘form of life’, and therefore capable of following (ape) rules.

Hacker argues convincingly that Wittgenstein was less interested in how, as a matter of natural history, we actually established our practices; but rather in what constitutes them.⁴⁸ But his sharp distinction between the “genesis” of an ability and the “possession” of it seems too sharp for Wittgenstein, who viewed training as not merely a historical fact but also part of the web of circumstances from which our practices emerge:

“But couldn’t we imagine that someone without any training should see a sum that was set to do, and straightaway find himself in the mental state that in the normal course of things is only produced by training and practice? So that he knew he could calculate although he had never calculated. (One might then, it seems, say; The training would merely be history, and merely as a matter of empirical fact would it be necessary for the production of knowledge.) – But suppose now he is in that state of uncertainty and he calculates wrong? What is he supposed to say himself? And suppose he then multiplied sometimes right, sometimes again quite wrong. – The training may of course be overlooked as mere history, if he now *always* calculates right. But that he *can* calculate shows, to himself as well as to others only by this, that he *calculates* correctly.

What, in complicated surroundings, we call “following a rule” we should certainly not call that if it stood in isolation.”⁴⁹

What makes regularities in responses ‘abilities’ or ‘techniques’, rather than a mere natural dispositions (like reflex actions), is the wider context in which the action is something that we call “the exercise of an ability”. And this context includes the circumstances in which the ability was acquired.⁵⁰ For we often exercise skills, like hitting a ball or even driving, automatically and without thinking about what we are doing. One criterion for distinguishing between what we call a “reflex action” and what we call the “exercise of an ability” is the explanations that we give for our actions (for example, ‘my driving instructor drummed it into me to check my mirrors before manoeuvring’).

(b) *Regularity*

It’s also clear that Wittgenstein thought that training does not always bring about the regularity necessary for a practice:

⁴⁸ Baker & Hacker (2009) pp.159-60,167-8, quoting in particular, §§243, 257, 495 and *BB* p.12.

⁴⁹ *RFM* VI-33.

⁵⁰ Williams (1999) p.181.

“Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way. But what if one person reacts to the order and training *thus*, and another *otherwise*? Who is right, then?”⁵¹

At one extreme, if every person reacted to training in a radically different way then the answer to Wittgenstein’s normative question of ‘who is right?’ would be that no-one is right: that there is no such thing as ‘right’.⁵² And, indeed, if we did not then there would be no such thing as ‘training’ – for if people were to react to us in radically different ways, our concept of training would lose its point:

“...if rule became exception, and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency – our normal language games would thereby lose their point. – The procedure of putting a lump of cheese on a balance and fixing the price by the turn of the scale would lose its point if it frequently happened that such lumps suddenly grew or shrank with no obvious cause.”⁵³

Wittgenstein’s point here is that it is the regularity of our measurements of weight that gives the practice of selling cheese by weight its purpose. There needs to be uniformity – “a normal case” – for there to be a practice. Similarly with training, which presupposes a certain level of consistency or regularity in our reactions without which there is no practice – and therefore no standard by which to judge whether an action is ‘correct’.⁵⁴ We do not, however, find that this extreme case obtains – we do, in fact, respond to training in regular ways. And these practices – regularities of behaving – are the backdrop against which normativity can emerge. Wittgenstein continued his remark (§206) to suggest that the answer to this question of “who is right?” may be found in the process by which we try to understand an unknown language:

“Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?

Shared human behaviour is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.”⁵⁵

So Wittgenstein suggests that similarities in behaviour, between the ‘foreigners’ and the explorer, that enables the explorer to interpret the foreigners’ language. We would say that the foreigners

⁵¹ §206.

⁵² Cf. §258.

⁵³ §142.

⁵⁴ See also Baker & Hacker (2009) p.144.

⁵⁵ §206.

gave orders etc. in circumstances where we observed them acting as we would, using similar tones of voice, having similar facial expressions, body language, and so on. But is this shared (non-linguistic) behaviour sufficient to enable interpretation? Wittgenstein answers this question in the negative, by means of another thought experiment:

“Let’s imagine that the people in that country carried on usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their activities, we find them intelligible, they seem ‘logical’. But when we try to learn their language, we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make, and their activities; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if, for example, we gag one of these people, this has the same consequences as with us: without those sounds their actions fall into confusion – as I feel like putting it.

Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and so on?

There is not enough regularity for us to call it “language”.⁵⁶

Wittgenstein suggests here that a number of ingredients for us (as explorers) to be able to understand these foreigners are present: their non-linguistic activities are similar to ours; they conduct what appear to be linguistic activities; and their ‘linguistic’ behaviour seems to be causally connected to their non-linguistic behaviour in some way.⁵⁷ But one key ingredient is missing: a regular connection between their ‘linguistic’ and non-linguistic behaviour. There are two possible morals of this story: that the sounds made by the foreigners *is* not language, because there *is* no regular connection between the sounds and actions; or that we, as observers, cannot *say* that it is language because we have not been able to *discern* any connection.

There is support in the text for both readings. The constitutive reading (that it *isn’t* language) is supported by Wittgenstein’s explanation of why we’d find it “impossible” to learn the foreigner’s language: that “there is no regular connection”. On the other hand, the epistemological reading (that we can’t know if it is a language) is justified by the wording in the final two sentences – “Are we to *say*...” and “...for *us* to *call* it “language”” (my emphasis) – in which Wittgenstein is looking at how we would judge the situation, as a matter of our language. The fact that Wittgenstein puts “language” in inverted commas, in particular, suggests that Wittgenstein was here making a grammatical remark: one about how we use our language, rather than what is or is not the case.

⁵⁶ §207.

⁵⁷ It is implicit that, unlike the ‘monolingualists’ of §243 (see chapter 5(a)), these people are interacting: talking *to each other*.

The distinction between the two readings, and between the constitutive and epistemological questions, is dissolved by reminding ourselves of Wittgenstein's conception of language. Whether it is language, and whether we would *call* it "language", effectively amount to the same thing. For "language" is, after all, a word of our language – and we stipulate what it may and may not be applied to,⁵⁸ by describing the experience that we wish to call "language".⁵⁹ That is not to say that we are free to stipulate whatever we like. We might think that what sound, or set of ink marks, we choose to associate with a phenomenon (for example, human language) is purely conventional.⁶⁰ But whether we are prepared to apply the word "language" to another phenomenon (e.g. the noises of dolphins) depends on our observations of (and attitudes towards) that phenomenon within the context of a practice.⁶¹ A new situation calls for a decision – an action.⁶² And the more abnormal the case, the less clear it is what we are to say: whether to extend our concept to this new application.⁶³ It is our agreement in such judgements that allows us to communicate using language.⁶⁴

The question "Is this phenomenon language?" does make sense: it means something like 'are there sufficient affinities (and insufficient dissimilarities) between this phenomenon and other things that we call "language" (e.g. paradigmatic examples) to warrant us applying this word to that phenomenon'. It is a grammatical question – and grammar merely describes our uses of words, it does not justify those uses.⁶⁵ Our grammar is autonomous: it is not itself answerable to any standard, but rather partly constitutes our practices (our 'form of life') within which normativity arises.⁶⁶ The metaphysical question of whether the foreigners' sounds *are* language (i.e. independently of our judgements and practices), rather than what we would call "language", is one that Wittgenstein would reject as nonsense.⁶⁷ For this would be to mistakenly search for the *essence* of language, rather than to describe how we use the word "language".

We can't ask, for example, whether the foreigners themselves would consider the sounds that they make to be language, for "language" is a word of *our* language and its meaning lies in how *we* are prepared to use it, what *we* are willing to apply it to. The foreigners are only able to apply our word

⁵⁸ "Now does this mean that it is nonsensical to talk of a locality where thought takes place? Certainly not. This phrase has sense if we give it sense." *BB* p.7.

⁵⁹ "If, however, we do use the expression "the thought takes place in the head", we have given this expression its meaning by describing the experience which would justify the hypothesis that the thought takes place in our heads, by describing the experience that we wish to call "observing thought in our brain". (*BB* p.8)

⁶⁰ But this is not always the case: in the language game of poetry, for example, regularities in the sounds of words play an important role. This is what Wittgenstein calls the "soul" of a word (§§530-1).

⁶¹ As Hacker puts it: "...grammatical relations are stipulated, not discovered – but only within a framework of regularities." Baker & Hacker (2009) p.175.

⁶² §186.

⁶³ §142.

⁶⁴ §242.

⁶⁵ §496.

⁶⁶ §497. See chapter 3(d) for more on this.

⁶⁷ "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use." §116. See also chapter 5(b).

“language” to their actions to the extent that they are language users capable of understanding our language, which is what is in question to begin with. We might speculate that the foreigners have a word which they use in similar ways to those in which we use “language”, but such speculation would be idle: we can’t treat the foreigners’ sounds as what we call “words”, as we can’t discern a regular connection between their sounds and their actions. Without shared practices, without sufficient regularities, our concepts can’t get a “footing” on the actions of the ‘foreigners’.⁶⁸

The conclusion that Wittgenstein is making a grammatical rather than a metaphysical remark is reinforced by another thought experiment: the so-called ‘inscrutable geometer’:

“Imagine someone following a line that serves him as a rule in this way: he holds a pair of compasses, and guides one of its points along the line that is the ‘rule’, while the other draws the line that follows the rule. And while he moves along the rule, he alters the opening of the compasses, apparently with great precision, looking at the rule the whole time as if it determined what he did. And watching him, we see no regularity of any kind in this opening and shutting of the compasses....perhaps we really would say: “The original seems to *intimate* to him how he has to go. But it is not a rule.”⁶⁹

This is another case where appearances tell us that someone is *not* following a rule – “we see no regularity”. But this does not mean that there *is* no regularity. We can imagine engaging our geometer in a dialogue and receiving an explanation (a rule) for his actions: perhaps there are tiny marks on the line that indicate how one is to open the compasses, which we hadn’t noticed till he pointed them out. Discerning this regularity would give us cause to withdraw our initial judgment and replace it with the opposite one: that he *is* following a rule. So, as our judgement of rule-following depends on our (fallible) abilities to discern regularities, we cannot say that the geometer isn’t following a rule (as a metaphysical claim) but merely that what he’s doing is not what we call “following a rule”. The most we can do is make a grammatical remark, describe what we would do – how we would apply our concepts in this situation.

It might still be objected that either there is regularity or there is not, regardless of what we might say about it. An omniscient being would know whether the ‘foreigners’ were using language or not, and our geometer would not be inscrutable to it. But Wittgenstein thought that what counts as a regularity can only be determined from *within* a practice.⁷⁰ The meanings of the words “regular”,

⁶⁸ Zettel §390, quoted in Baker & Hacker (2009) p.222.

⁶⁹ §237.

⁷⁰ As Hacker puts it: “It is the practice itself which is, as it were, the arbiter of what counts as doing the same thing... What counts as doing the same within a normative practice is determined from the perspective of the practice itself.” Baker & Hacker (2009) p.146.

“uniform” and “same” are learned in the same way as those of other concept words: by inculcation in a practice of using them, by means of examples and exercises.⁷¹ The identity of a thing with itself is not an “infallible paradigm” of sameness, but rather an example of a “useless” (and therefore meaningless) sentence;⁷² and to say of two things that they are the “same” requires a criterion of ‘sameness’.⁷³ And that will depend crucially on the context in which the word “same” is being used: our concepts of sameness, following rules, and practices are interwoven.⁷⁴ Wittgenstein rejects the idea the concept of identity can exist in a vacuum, independently of a context of use:

“A logician will perhaps think: The same is the same – how a person satisfies himself of sameness is a psychological question. (High is high – it is a matter of psychology that one sometimes *sees*, and sometimes *hears* it.)

What is the criterion for the sameness of two images? – What is the criterion for the redness of an image? For me, when it’s someone else’s image: what he says and does. – For myself, when it’s my image: nothing. And what goes for “red” also goes for “same”.⁷⁵

Wittgenstein’s comparison of “same” with “high” is instructive: to ask what “high” means independently of a context is meaningless. To say that a building is high involves a very different application of “high” than saying that a musical note is high, and not because they are homonyms (but rather because of the conventions of musical notation). Similarly, what counts as the “same” depends crucially on the context in which the word is used. In the second paragraph of this remark, Wittgenstein expresses himself slightly strangely – but the remark is very important for seeing the intersubjective nature of language. His point is that my criteria for whether someone else sees a picture as I do lie in something that I can judge from her behaviour, but I have no criterion for whether two pictures that I see are the same. This point is reinforced in Wittgenstein’s next remark:

““Before I judge that two images which I have are the same, surely I must recognise them as the same.” And when that has happened, how am I to know that the word “same” describes what I recognise? Only if I can express my recognition in some other way, and if it is possible for someone else to teach me that “same” is the correct word here.

For if I need a warrant for using a word, it must also be a warrant for someone else.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ §208. See also *RFM* VI-44: “The concept “regular tapping”, “regular figure”, is taught us in the same way as ‘light-coloured’ or ‘dirty’ or ‘gaudy’”.

⁷² §§215-6.

⁷³ §226.

⁷⁴ §225.

⁷⁵ §377.

⁷⁶ §378.

Here Wittgenstein brings the issue back to one of language: it is not whether (metaphysically) the two imagines *are* the same, but whether I'd call them the "same". And to be able to use that word of our common language, I must manifest my understanding in my actions (express my recognition in another way) so that another person can agree that the use of the word "same" is appropriate.

(c) *Understanding and intention*

So we've seen that regularity plays a crucial role in practices of following rules. But what distinguishes regularities in human actions that we call "following a rule" from other natural regularities. What is the difference between Crusoe marking arrows in the sand and following them to reach the coconut grove and the activities of ants in leaving odour marks in the forest to enable them to revisit a food source?⁷⁷ The key difference between 'acting in accordance with' a rule and 'following' the rule lies in the concepts of understanding and intention. The ant may act in accordance with a rule, but it doesn't understand the rule and nor does it intend its actions to conform to it. In order for someone (like Crusoe) to be following a rule, the rule must form part of his explanation of why he acted in this way and not that way.⁷⁸

Wittgenstein repeatedly argued that the key concept of understanding is not a mental state or process but rather a skill, a technique, an ability.⁷⁹ To understand a rule is to know what constitutes acting in accordance with it, but this does not consist in an occurrent thought – it is shown by what we do.⁸⁰ But understanding a rule is not simply a matter of performing this or that action in isolation, but is also exhibited in the circumstances in which those actions are performed:

"...making a move in chess doesn't consist only in pushing a piece from here to there on the board – nor yet in the thoughts and feelings that accompany the move; but in the *circumstances* that we call "playing a game of chess", "solving a chess problem", and the like."⁸¹ (my emphasis)

It is the context in which the actions are performed, the complex web of interactions between the actor and his environment, that shows whether or not the actor understands a rule, and has therefore 'followed' it rather than merely acted in accord with it.⁸² Wittgenstein illustrated this in a

⁷⁷ The ant example is from Kusch (2006) p.194.

⁷⁸ This explanation doesn't have to take the form of a rule-formulation, but may consist of giving the examples or observations by which she learnt the rule (§54).

⁷⁹ §149-54; §199; §321.

⁸⁰ "Let us remember that there are certain criteria in a man's behaviour for his not understanding a word: that it means nothing to him, that he can do nothing with it." §269; "This explanation of a word, like any other, he might understand rightly, wrongly, or not at all. And he will show which by his use of the word, in this as in other cases." §288.

⁸¹ §35.

⁸² "What, in complicated surroundings, we call "following a rule" we should certainly not call that if it stood in isolation." *RFM* VI-33.

rather neglected remark, about alternative ways of playing chess, that comes in the midst of the remarks that form the key battleground between ‘individualists’ and ‘communitarians’ (§§198-202):

“It is, of course, imaginable that two people belonging to a tribe unacquainted with games, should sit at a chessboard and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the mental accompaniments. And if we were to see it, we’d say that they were playing chess.”⁸³

This remark shows that regularity, even with mental accompaniments such as representations of the rules of chess and the genuinely held belief that those rules are being followed, is insufficient to constitute a practice. Wittgenstein here emphasises the ‘physiognomy’ of rule-following: we would judge, from the tribesmen’s actions, that they were playing chess – because we are familiar with the practices of playing games in general (and chess in particular). But the tribesmen are not playing chess, as they are strangers to these practices. The tribesmen are acting in accordance with the rules of chess but they are not following them – because they do not understand what playing chess is.

One might ask: what justifies us in reaching that conclusion? For there seems to be no way for us to distinguishing between the tribesmen’s actions and those of two people who are playing chess. Well, Wittgenstein stipulated that the tribe are unacquainted with games, but we may imagine circumstances where we might determine this empirically. Perhaps we observe the tribe over an extended period and notice on other activities that we would call “playing a game”. And our task would be made much easier if we were able to interact with the tribesmen, for example by attempting to teach them to play another game, or by communicating with them in a common language – in which they’d be able to tell us that their actions are a ceremony or ritual and that they do not know what a “game” is. As the circumstances grow ever more complex, and interaction makes possible explanation of actions, understanding becomes more clearly discernable. The rest of Wittgenstein’s remark brings out that it is the superficial similarity between the tribesmen’s actions and our practice of playing chess that tempts us to attribute our practice to them:

“...But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a *game* – say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people to yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess that we are used to; and this in such a way that what goes on is translatable by suitable rules into a game of chess. Would we still be inclined to say that they were playing a game? And with what right could one say so?”⁸⁴

⁸³ §200.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Here Wittgenstein removes that superficial similarity and presents us with something more akin to the “Haka” battle dance that the New Zealand rugby team performs prior to their games. The clear implication is that we would not be inclined to say that the tribesmen were playing a game, perhaps unless we (somehow) happened upon a translation of the yells and stamps into chess moves.

Returning to our examples of Crusoe and the ant, it is the totality of Crusoe’s behaviour – including the practices that we share with him, and any explanations that he might give for why he acted as he did – that warrants our conclusion that he is following a rule. On the other hand, the aggregate of our observations of the ant – that we share very few (if any) practices with it, that it doesn’t otherwise appear to exhibit intelligent or intentional behaviour, that it doesn’t possess language and can proffer no explanation of its actions – show that it is merely acting in accordance with a rule, but not following it. This holistic picture casts light on Wittgenstein’s comment that:

“To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to have mastered a technique.”⁸⁵

A parrot or a machine might appear to say what we call a “sentence”, but it is merely making a noise.⁸⁶ For an utterance is only a sentence against the backdrop of its use in a particular context, as part of a language. And to understand a sentence is to know how to use it:

““After he had said this, he left her as he did the day before.” – Do I understand this sentence? Do I understand it just as I would if I heard it in the course of a report? If it stood alone, I’d say I don’t know what it’s about. But all the same, I’d know how this sentence might be used; I could even invent a context for it. / (A multitude of familiar paths lead off from these words in all directions.)”⁸⁷

Wittgenstein made similar points in relation to the intention to conform one’s actions to a rule.⁸⁸ He rejected the idea that intention is a mental process which does not depend on there being any custom or technique.⁸⁹ And he remarked that, like understanding, the word “intention” has meaning only in the context of its use:

“But didn’t I already intend the whole construction of the sentence (for example) at its beginning? So surely it already existed in my mind before I uttered it out loud! – If it was in my mind, still it would not normally be there in some different word order. But here again, we are

⁸⁵ §199.

⁸⁶ §344.

⁸⁷ §525.

⁸⁸ Wittgenstein linked the grammar of “intention” with that of “understanding” in §660: “The grammar of the expression “I was then going to say...” is related to that of the expression “I could then have gone on”. In the one case, I remember an intention, in the other I remember having understood.”.

⁸⁹ §205.

forming a misleading picture of ‘intending’: that is, of the use of this word. An intention is embedded in a setting, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess. To the extent that I do intend the construction of an English sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak English.”⁹⁰

Wittgenstein’s point here is that intentions don’t exist in a vacuum – they have a content which is partly provided by the context. An intention is an intention to do something (like play chess), and so it is a precondition of that intention that the practice of doing that something (playing chess) exists.

(d) *Normativity*

A key characteristic of a practice is that it gives rise to normativity – it provides a standard by which to judge actions to be correct or incorrect. But this could also be said to be true of all regularities of action, which may themselves play the role of a normative standard. So to act *correctly* is to respond to a given situation in accordance with the regularity, and to act *incorrectly* is to respond to that situation in another way. So the ant which moves along the trail of odour marks acts correctly, whereas the one which (say) has an impaired sense of smell and moves in another direction acts incorrectly. It would be implausible to suggest, however, that the ant *sees itself as* acting correctly or incorrectly.⁹¹ Something more is required for us to see an ant as behaving normatively – that it is following a practice, in a complex context in which it can demonstrate faculties such as understanding and intention.

So there is a distinction between acting in accordance with a rule and “following a rule” correctly. The latter requires not only correct action, but correct understanding of the rule – knowing what acts we count as being in accord with it.⁹² This is what Hacker refers to as the “internal relation” between the rule and the actions that accord with it.⁹³ But it is more apt to describe normativity as internal to the practice, which involves not only any rule-formulation and regularity in behaviour, but also the circumstances which give the concepts of understanding and intention their content.

One consequence of the conclusion that normativity arises from within the practice is that its normative standards cannot be applied to the practice itself. The practice is not, in itself, right or

⁹⁰ §337. See also: “An expectation is embedded in a situation” §581; “Could someone have a feeling of ardent love or hope for one second – *no matter what* preceded or followed this second? – What is happening now has significance – in these surroundings. The surroundings give it its importance.” §583.

⁹¹ “When a thrush always repeats the same phrase several times in its song, do we say that perhaps it gives itself a rule each time, and then follows the rule?” *RFM* VI-41.

⁹² “Now let us suppose that after some efforts on the teacher’s part he continues the series *correctly, that is, as we do it.*” §145 (my emphasis).

⁹³ Baker & Hacker (2009) pp.147,150-1.

wrong – rather, it is grounded in our shared actions, and in the general facts about us and our environment which give rise to our concepts:

“I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). Rather: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realising something that we realise – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.”⁹⁴

In the context of language, this means that our grammar (our set of practices of using words in particular ways) is autonomous. It is not answerable to anything outside itself, because we have no extra-linguistic grasp of reality. We can’t step outside of our language to assess how it’s doing, for the only vehicle we have for making that assessment is our very language itself:

“The rules of grammar may be called “arbitrary”, if that is to mean that the *purpose* of grammar is nothing but that of language. If someone says, “If our language had not this grammar, it could not express these facts” – it should be asked what “*could*” means here.”⁹⁵

Wittgenstein here points out that our very notion of possibility is inextricably wrapped up with our word “could” and its meaning – its uses – in particular contexts. Normativity is internal to a practice, and the practice itself cannot be said to be “correct” or “incorrect”.

(e) *Attitude*

At this point, it could be suggested that what characterises a practice is regularity in action (perhaps brought about by training) combined with a certain environmental complexity. We might explore this suggestion by looking at an issue that unquestionably interested Wittgenstein: whether computers can think, follow rules, use language, and so on.⁹⁶ We say that computers “execute commands” but we do not say that they “follow rules” (except perhaps in a special sense) and we do not say that they use “language”, though the affinities between their software and our languages is shown by the term “computer language”. We say that computers process data but they do not *understand* it. What accounts for this difference? One suggestion is that it is a matter of complexity, that the degree of complexity that computers exhibit is of an order of magnitude lower than the complexity exhibited in human behaviour. But, of course, the rate of progress of computer

⁹⁴ *PPF* (xii) § 366.

⁹⁵ §497.

⁹⁶ Of course, the nature of what we call a “computer” is radically different from the machines that existed when Wittgenstein was writing his later ‘works’ in the 1930s and 1940s.

technology is startling, and we can certainly conceive of (if not positively expect) the development of computers whose complexity matches or even exceeds that of a human adult.⁹⁷ Currently, computers are able to have a degree of ‘artificial intelligence’, to exhibit learning behaviour, to correct their own mistakes etc. Is it a matter of principle (logic, grammar) that computers cannot “follow rules”, or is this an empirical hypothesis?

There is, of course, a well-known test of a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour: the ‘Turing test’.⁹⁸ This involves a human engaging in two separate conversations in natural language – one with another human, and one with a computer – in circumstances where the only criterion for determining which is which is the responses given during the conversation. If the human judge cannot reliably distinguish the machine from the other human then the machine has passed the test. No computer has yet passed the Turing test but, even if we suppose that in the future one did, would we be prepared to call its responses “language”?

Wittgenstein would not, I think, view this as a purely epistemic matter, as a question of individuals forming beliefs or opinions, but also as a matter of adopting a certain attitude towards a situation. In a series of remarks, Wittgenstein argues that our view that a human is not an “automaton” (machines) is not a matter of *belief* but rather an *attitude* or bearing towards that person:

“21. “I believe that he is not an automaton”, just like that, so far makes no sense.

22. My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.”⁹⁹

And Wittgenstein considers that it is our physical form, the human body, that best accounts for the compelling nature of this attitude.¹⁰⁰ We adopt a certain perspective on a person – we think *this* of them, we expect *that* of them. We need to have already adopted an attitude towards a creature as a language user in order to be able to assess their behaviour for ‘linguistic’ regularities. And we do this not only as a result of our shared behavioural practices, but also our shared physical form.

So we may ask: would it make a difference to whether we’d apply the word “language” to the signs used by a computer that has passed the Turing test if that computer was not (say) a laptop but rather took the form of a human being (like the ‘replicants’ in the film “Blade Runner”)? I would

⁹⁷ The defeat of world chess champion Gary Kasparov by the computer Deep Blue in May 1997 was arguably a symbolic stage in this development.

⁹⁸ The ‘Turing test’ is named after Alan Turing, who attended lectures given by Wittgenstein in Cambridge.

⁹⁹ *PPF* (iv). I’m grateful to David Levy for bringing these remarks to my attention, and for pointing out that that “*Einstellung*” (attitude) may also be translated as “bearing”. This casts light on Wittgenstein’s cryptic comment that: “...meaning something is like going towards someone.” §457.

¹⁰⁰ “The human body is the best picture of the human soul.” *PPF* (iv) §25.

tentatively submit that the answer to this question would be ‘yes’ – that it would be more difficult to say that a replicant was not using “language” than it would be to say that of a talking laptop. We might be capable of being persuaded that the replicants are not language users (for example, by convincing evidence that they are merely machines) but our initial (non-epistemic) attitude towards them would significantly affect our willingness to apply words like “language” to their utterances.

Returning again to Crusoe and the ant, our observation that Crusoe’s physical form is that of a human (and that of the ant is very different to that of a human) leads us to adopt very different attitudes towards them. We expect what we might call typical human behaviour, such as rule-following, from Crusoe that we simply do not expect of an ant. We might be persuadable that a creature which does not take physical human form is capable of following rules, but our initial attitude towards it would be very different to that which we adopt towards another human.

(f) Conclusion

To sum up where we’ve reached: following a rule is a practice, a regularity in action, which typically requires training. It involves a complex setting in which the actor can exhibit understanding of the rule and the intention to follow it. Practices generate normativity from within – to understand and intend to follow a rule is to conceive of it as a norm, something that constrains correct action – but practices can’t themselves be tested for correctness. And whether or not we recognise rule-following is partly based on an attitude that we adopt towards that which is performing the action.

4. The “community view”

Against the backdrop of this concept of the practice of following a rule, we can turn to our key questions: is a physically isolated individual (Crusoe) and/or radically isolated individual (Tarzan) able to follow rules? I’ll explore this initially by reference to what is probably the leading version of the ‘community view’: that of Saul Kripke’s ‘sceptical solution’ (as defended and developed by Martin Kusch).¹⁰¹ But before setting out and commenting on that view in detail, I’ll briefly state its conclusions: a Crusoe can be said to follow rules but, if we do so, we are “taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule-following to him.”;¹⁰² but a Tarzan cannot be said to follow rules – as he is “too different from us for us to be entitled to regard him as a rule-follower.”¹⁰³

Kripke starts developing his ‘sceptical solution’ with a methodological point: that, following Wittgenstein’s exhortation not to think but to look, we have to see under what circumstances

¹⁰¹ Kripke (1982) pp.86-110; Kusch (2006) pp.177-95.

¹⁰² Kripke (1982) p.110; Kusch (2006) p.184.

¹⁰³ Kusch (2006) p.194.

attributions of rule-following (meaning) are actually made (and the role those attributions play in our lives) rather than reasoning *a priori* about such matters.¹⁰⁴ He then points out that rule-following is a familiar activity, and we follow rules “unhesitatingly” and “without justification” i.e. as a matter of course.¹⁰⁵ But if we look at a single individual in isolation then that is the end of the matter – all we can say is that he confidently follows his inclinations as to what to do, which is not our normal concept of rule-following.¹⁰⁶ However:

“The situation is very different if we widen our gaze from to consider the individual interacting with a wider community. Others will then have justification conditions for attributing correct or incorrect rule following to the subject, and these will *not* be simply that the subject’s own authority is unconditionally to be accepted.”¹⁰⁷

In this context, the community will judge that the actor is following a rule if his actions agree with those that members of the community would be inclined to perform.¹⁰⁸ An individual who passes such tests in enough cases is admitted as a normal speaker of the language and member of the community.¹⁰⁹ For Kripke’s Wittgenstein, agreement is essential to our game of ascribing rules and concepts to one another, and the set of responses in which we agree (and the way they interweave with our activities) is our *form of life*.¹¹⁰ This regularity in responses must, for Kripke’s Wittgenstein, be taken as a brute empirical fact (i.e. one that cannot be justified but must simply be accepted).¹¹¹ Kripke concludes that Wittgenstein thought that all talk of an individual following rules has reference to him as a member of a community.¹¹² And Kripke explicitly considered the case of a Crusoe:

“Does this mean that Robinson Crusoe, isolated on an island, cannot be said to follow any rules, no matter what he does? I do not see that this follows. What does follow is that *if* we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him. The falsity of the private model need not mean that a *physically isolated* individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather that an individual, *considered in isolation* (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ Kripke (1982) p.86-7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.88.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.89.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.91-2.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.98, 109.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.109.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.110.

Prior to commenting on Kripke's position, I'll make two point of clarification. The first is that Kripke's 'sceptical solution' is intimately bound up with (and expressed in the language of) his reading of Wittgenstein as a sceptic about meaning. As Kusch and Fogelin (who's version of the community view was discussed in chapter 3(a)) also read Wittgenstein in this way, one might think that the two positions are inextricably linked. However, this is not the case. The leading Wittgenstein scholar Meredith Williams, for one, rejects the meaning-sceptical reading; but nonetheless advocates a version of the community view.¹¹⁴

Translating Kripke's 'sceptical solution' into more neutral language, we might say that if we consider an individual in isolation from the context in which he acts (including the practices in which he participates)¹¹⁵ then we cannot say of him that he is following a rule. But if we widen our gaze to include the complex web of social and environmental interactions which form the basis of our attitudes and our judgements of understanding and of intentional activity, we can view the individual as a rule-follower. We will do so if the individual's actions accord with our practice, and that we judge that the individual understands the rule and intends to conform to it.

The second point is that Kripke's claim that by judging whether Crusoe has followed a rule we are "taking him into our community" is an unfortunate turn of phrase for three reasons. Firstly, that it misses the point that it is not a 'community' that makes the judgement, but another person – which encourages the mistaken view that a community is akin to an individual, an 'individual writ-large'. This is not to deny that behavioural norms are shared by groups, or perhaps even by a whole community. It is, rather, to counter the view that the community is a Senate, sitting in judgement on an individual's actions, and that a member of the community needs to conduct opinion polls or suchlike to determine what the 'correct' response is. The emphasis is rather on the fact that the judgement of rule-following is an action of a single member of the community, albeit that that membership influences his judgements.

Secondly, because it suggests that the taking of Crusoe into our community is a consequence of making the judgement, whereas the shared practice of Crusoe and the 'community' is a precondition of being able to make that judgement. The second part of Kripke's sentence: "...and applying our criteria for rule following to him" is much more apt. Thirdly, we have an intuitive notion of what we call "taking someone into our community" and this has given rise to misplaced objections. For example, Baker & Hacker object that:

¹¹⁴ "Hacker and G.P. Baker were early critics of Kripke's take on Wittgenstein, and it is correct to say that they won the day on this matter." Williams (2002); Williams (1999).

¹¹⁵ Rather like the tribesmen of \$200 are isolated from the practice of playing games.

“When we say of the cat that it is hunting the mouse, we are applying our criteria of hunting to it. Do we thereby take the cat into our community?”¹¹⁶

The response to this is not, as Kusch maintains, that ‘rule-follower’ is a social status whereas ‘hunter’ is not.¹¹⁷ Rather, it is that we’re not ‘taking the cat into our community’ in the sense that we’d go out for a drink with it, or keep an eye on its house when it goes on holiday, but that there are sufficient affinities between human and feline practices of hunting to entitle us to apply our word “hunt” to the cat’s activities. When it comes to a rule-governed activity such as language, however, there are insufficient similarities between our utterances and a cat’s meows for us to call it “language”.¹¹⁸

It is clear from the above quote that Kripke thought that a Crusoe could follow rules, and this view is shared by leading communitarians – though none of them clearly state why they reached that conclusion.¹¹⁹ However, we may analyse the position using Wittgenstein’s concept of a ‘practice’ elucidated in chapter 3. Firstly, Crusoe was brought up in English society and trained in the use of English language and many other practices of following rules. Secondly, there is sufficient regularity in Crusoe’s behaviour (this tends to be assumed). Thirdly, Crusoe has demonstrated (and it is assumed may still demonstrate) understanding of rules and the intention to follow them. And finally, we naturally adopt an attitude towards Crusoe as a rule-follower.

What might be questionable is whether Crusoe’s would continue to exhibit sufficiently regular behaviour, and to show understanding and intentional action, as his period of isolation progresses. Crusoe’s case is, of course, fictional – and there is some evidence that socially isolated individuals cease to be able to use articulated language (and have articulated thoughts) within 12-18 months of isolation.¹²⁰ Kusch expresses Wittgenstein’s concept of the ‘circumstances’ – the background against which a practice emerges and which gives it shape – in terms of being ‘socially embedded’.¹²¹ Social life is episodic; we regularly experience periods of physical isolation between social interactions, but we remain socially embedded during those periods.¹²² This responds to an objection of McGinn’s to one version of the community view: that when we go on holiday alone to a desert island, we remain

¹¹⁶ Baker & Hacker (1984) p.40.

¹¹⁷ Kusch (2006) p.188-9.

¹¹⁸ Note, however, that where there are similar human and feline practices (for example, recognising a threat or desiring food) we do think that we can interpret cat sounds as expressions of “fear” or “hunger”.

¹¹⁹ “Nothing in the community view as I have stated it excludes the possibility of a permanently isolated desert-islander rule-follower.” Peacocke (1981) p.93; “...it is important to note that we are concerned with a *radically isolated* individual, that is, someone who has never been in contact with a community. There is no problem for the community view in allowing for individuals who have left society and yet continue to engage in rule-following and indeed invent new practices for themselves.” Williams (1999) p.172; “In what follows I shall always have the latter stronger version of Crusoe in mind.” Kusch (2006) p.184.

¹²⁰ I’m grateful to David Levy for this point.

¹²¹ Kusch (2006) p.188.

¹²² *Ibid.*

socially embedded and do not thereby lose our capacity to follow rules.¹²³ One form that this embedding might take is a presumption of rule-following in favour of those who have demonstrated an ability to follow particular rules in the past. As Kripke puts it:

“...*after* the community judges (based on the original criteria) that he has mastered the appropriate rule, the community may (for certain rules) take the subject’s sincere claim to follow it in this instance as itself a new criterion for the correctness of his claim, without applying the original criteria.”¹²⁴

This may be what Kusch means when he refers to the “social status” of being a rule-follower: once a status is granted, it endures for as long as we have no positive reason to remove it.¹²⁵ But like that of other social statuses, such as that of being a ‘chief’, it is not enough that a person exhibits behaviour that would lead a (hypothetical) observer to confer that status: he is only the chief if that title is *actually* conferred.¹²⁶ This supports that view that following a rule requires not only behavioural regularities but also actions of other members of a community.

Kusch asks (but does not answer) the question whether Crusoe’s 26 years of isolation was mere physical isolation (i.e. he remained socially embedded and therefore able to follow rules) or amounted to social isolation (possibly resulting in a loss of the ability to follow rules). This seems to be one of those cases (highlighted by Wittgenstein) which is so abnormal that it is not clear what we would say – our concepts and rules did not arise from this type of situation, and how we might develop them to deal with the new situation calls for decision rather than intuition.¹²⁷ But the empirical evidence noted above tends to suggest that, if a real case of a Crusoe were to emerge, he would (at least initially) not display the behaviour regularities, understanding, and intentions that are characteristic of rule-following.

As mentioned above, the literature focuses on what we would say in the Tarzan case – where the isolated individual need not merely continue to follow rules that he previously understood and was deemed to be a competent follower of, but must invent the very notion of rule-following for himself. We can address the question of whether Tarzan could follow rules by applying Wittgenstein’s concept of a practice to him. Firstly, by hypothesis Tarzan has received no training in practices. We’ve seen that this is not strictly necessary for him to be able to act in accordance with a rule – there may be natural (biological) regularities in his behaviour, and we can imagine outlandish

¹²³ McGinn (1984) p.195.

¹²⁴ Kripke (1982) pp.101-2.

¹²⁵ Kusch (2006) p.36-8.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ §§80, 142, 186.

scenarios in which his rule-following abilities are acquired otherwise than as a result of training. But his lack of training is a factor in the complex context in which Tarzan could demonstrate understanding of a rule and intention to follow it. He could not, for example, explain his actions by reference to his training.

Secondly, we might suppose that regularities develop in Tarzan's behaviour. Commentators have exemplified this in different ways: as a self-taught ability to consistently solve a Rubik's cube that washes up on the shore, perhaps with the assistance of rudimentary diagrams or mnemonics without which he cannot solve it;¹²⁸ distributing sign-posts around the island as an *aide-memoire*, such as writing arrows in the sand to avoid the marshes;¹²⁹ consistently drawing a pattern consisting of three dots and three dashes (...---...---... etc.) on a wall.¹³⁰ It seems plausible that regularities in Tarzan's actions that accord with some of our rules, but rule-following requires more than this.

Thirdly, it is argued that Tarzan might exhibit understanding of a rule and the intention to follow it through further complexities in his behaviour. In particular, Baker & Hacker claim that Tarzan could show *corrective* behaviour:

"...when he notices four dots in a sequence he manifests annoyance with himself. He carefully goes back and rubs one out, and perhaps checks carefully adjacent marks, comparing them with his "master pattern". And so on. Of course, he is *not* merely following his "inclinations" but rather following the rule. And it is his behaviour, including his corrective behaviour, which shows both that he is following the rule, and *what he counts as following the rule*."¹³¹

However, as we've seen in chapter 3(c), his understanding and intention are not simply a matter of Tarzan's actions, but also of the wider circumstances in which the ability to understand arises and which partially gives intentions their content. We might ask how Tarzan might manifest "annoyance with himself", given that annoyance behaviour is something that we learn as we are brought up in a society. It is conceivable that he might make a loud noise and kick some straw, but the circumstances in which those activities become "manifesting annoyance" are absent. Similarly the notion that Tarzan could check something carefully – the context which supplies the contents of these concepts is lacking. As Wittgenstein put it:

¹²⁸ Blackburn (1984) p.42. The example is originally due to Michael Dummett.

¹²⁹ McGinn (1984) p.196-7.

¹³⁰ Baker & Hacker (1984) p.39.

¹³¹ Baker & Hacker (1984) p.39.

“If one pair of chimpanzees once scratched the figure / - - / in the earth and thereupon the other the series / - - / - - / etc., the first would not have given a rule nor would the other be following it, whatever else went on at the same time in the mind of the two of them.

If however there were observed, e.g., the phenomenon of a kind of instruction, of showing how and of imitation, of lucky and misfiring attempts, of reward and punishment and the like; if at length the one who had been so trained put figures which he had never seen before one after another in sequence as in the first example, then we should probably say that the one chimpanzee was writing rules down, and the other was following them.”¹³²

Here Wittgenstein attempts to sketch ‘circumstances’ which might entitle us to call an activity “following a rule”, involving multiple types of interaction over an extended period of time. But, in Tarzan’s case, such circumstances are completely absent.

Kusch emphasises that, whatever Tarzan does, he is too different from us to entitle us to say that he “follows rules”.¹³³ He quotes with approval Norman Lillegard’s reminders that a Tarzan would not have articulated language/thoughts that would turn his manipulations of the Rubik’s cube into a “solution”, a *correct* solving of it; and that we can imagine a ‘born Crusoe’ (i.e. a Tarzan) solving the Rubik’s cube only by forgetting what a born Crusoe is (perhaps by forgetting that he is a ‘born’ Crusoe).¹³⁴ And this seems right, for ‘solving’ the Rubik’s cube is a game, and in Tarzan’s circumstance the institution of a game is lacking. Kusch concludes that:

“In this story we find plenty of regularities and actions that accord with one of our rules, but we do not find rule-following...If [Tarzan] is not part of our community, then all hypotheses concerning his behaviour – that his behaviour constitutes a correction of earlier actions, an introduction or modification of a (new) rule – are fatally underdetermined.”¹³⁵

This assumption of too much similarity between us and Tarzan is evident in the phrasing of the examples themselves. For example, Baker & Hacker state that Tarzan might draw the pattern “in decorating the walls of his house”;¹³⁶ and McGinn supposes that Tarzan might discover the sign-post idea “upon reaching the age of reason”.¹³⁷ But the concept of “decorating” (and indeed that of a “house”), as opposed to making marks on a wall (or a place that one sleeps, eats etc.) only makes sense in the context of our cultural practices. And the concept of “reaching the age of reason” is an

¹³² *RFM* VI-43.

¹³³ Kusch (2006) pp.193-4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.194.

¹³⁶ Baker & Hacker (1984) p.39.

¹³⁷ McGinn (1984) p.196.

even clearer example – we say this of children who we’ve brought up to maturity through a long process of training and inculcation in a large variety of human practices (including, importantly, articulated language). What might entitle McGinn to assume that a Tarzan would ever reach an ‘age of reason’ is obscure.

Fourthly, can Tarzan’s actions be judged for correctness? Well, we are able to judge whether his actions (correctly) accord with one of our rules. But it seems that we are unable to judge whether he has *followed* the rules correctly, for the circumstances in which Tarzan could exhibit understanding of a rule and the intention to follow it are absent. As Williams puts it:

“It is only in the structured social practice of the community that the individual can engage in normative activity. The individual alone, as “thinker” or “actor”, hasn’t the resources for creating the context within which actions can be correct or incorrect.”¹³⁸

Fifthly and finally, we may ask what attitude we’d adopt towards Tarzan. As a result of his physical form, we would initially have a bearing towards him as a human “soul”, so we might interpret his behaviour with the expectation that he’ll exhibit understanding, intentions, and other characteristically human abilities and qualities. But it seems plausible that this initial non-epistemic attitude would wear off fairly quickly, in the light of his behaviour which – in the absence of the context in which they can develop – would fail to exhibit the understanding and intentions characteristic of rule-following.

In conclusion, it appears that too many of the characteristic features of practices are absent (or in serious question) for us to predict with any confidence that – were we to encounter a real-life Tarzan – we’d be prepared to describe its activities as following rules, using language, and so on.

5. Objections

I’ve responded to some objections to the view that rule-following characteristically involves intersubjectivity along the way. I’ll now deal with another three important objections.

(a) *The ‘monolinguists’ objection*

The first objection that I’ll address is an exegetical one. Hacker argues that Wittgenstein’s references to imaginary people who talk only to themselves (the so-called ‘monolinguists’), both in the

¹³⁸ Williams (1999) p.187.

Investigations and in his *Nachlass*, show that Wittgenstein believed that language needn't be essentially social.¹³⁹ Hacker considers that the key remark in the *Investigations* in this regard is:

"A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. So one could imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue, who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people's actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)"¹⁴⁰

Hacker argues that the fact that Wittgenstein has no problem with imagining such people, and applies the words "talking" and "language" to the sounds that they make, shows that the "logico-grammatical requirements" of language do not include a requirement that it be shared. I agree that Wittgenstein is not making a logical claim that intersubjectivity is essential to language: such a claim is contrary to Wittgenstein's whole approach to language: that concept words, such as "language", are characterised by family resemblances rather than essential properties. However, if it is a grammatical requirement, then it concerns describing how we actually use these words.

In that context, the fact that Wittgenstein applies this word to the monolingualists cannot bear the weight that Hacker put on it in his argument. Yes, can imagine monolingualists – but we can also imagine a talking pot.¹⁴¹ Wittgenstein does not always place great emphasis on conceivability arguments: he remarks that we can imagine a parrot being given reason, but it's important that we need to invoke God to arrive at this idea.¹⁴² And if someone can imagine a stone's having consciousness, this merely proves that such "image-mongery" is of no interest to us.¹⁴³

Wittgenstein is, of course, right in the first sentence of §243: we do *say* that we encourage ourselves, give ourselves orders, obey, blame and punish ourselves. We do actually use these words in those ways. But those uses stem from analogies – from taking terms normally used to characterise

¹³⁹ Hacker (2010) pp.102-4. McGinn also takes this view: "...in 243 Wittgenstein contemplates the real possibility of 'human beings who spoke only in monologue'; here he seems to allow that someone might have a language and never use it to communicate with others...This section seems to me to go against a good deal of the usual interpretation of Wittgenstein's general position: language is not, for Wittgenstein, 'essentially social', as this phrase is usually intended." (McGinn (1984) p.193 footnote 75).

¹⁴⁰ §243. Hacker quotes an early (but post 19 April 1944) draft of this remark found in MS 124. It should be noted, however, that Wittgenstein mentions the monologue people only in passing (on his way to discussing the possibility of a 'strongly' private language) – and the extra remarks in the earlier draft did not (for whatever reason) make it into the version of the *Investigations* that Wittgenstein prepared for publication.

¹⁴¹ "'But in a fairy tale a pot too can see and hear!" (Certainly; but it *can* also talk.)" §282.

¹⁴² §346. See also the account of Wittgenstein's arguments with Ramsey over whether one can 'imagine a row of trees going on without end' in Baker & Hacker (2005) p.246.

¹⁴³ §390. See also: "The feeling 'that it is possible, contrary to our preconceived ideas, to think this or that' – whatever that may mean – is of no interest to us...There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations." §109.

an interaction between two or more people and applying them to a single-person situation.¹⁴⁴ As Wittgenstein puts it:

“[Language] is above all the languages spoken by the peoples of the earth. And then we call “language” phenomena that bear a similarity to those languages”¹⁴⁵

As mentioned in chapter 2, Wittgenstein thought that uses of words may be graded for ‘normality’; and applying the words “talk” and “language” to the monolingualists appear to be an abnormal or secondary usage. What gives entitles us to this conclusion? Consider the following example. When I say “I ordered myself to get up at 6 a.m. this morning”, this means that I resolved to do so. This may or may not have been accompanied by a contemporaneous act of (inner) speech. Getting up at 6 a.m. is a task that I find difficult to do, but perhaps the alarm went off and I reacted to it by getting up – without saying anything to myself. When asked later how I managed to do it, I respond: “I ordered myself to do it.” The use of the word “order” in this context clearly doesn’t have the same meaning as in a context where an army drill instructor enters my room at 6 a.m. and shouts “Get up!” Wittgenstein recognises a similar difference of meaning when he discusses the use of “gift”:

“Why can’t my right hand give my left hand money? My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift, and my left hand a receipt. – But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, and so forth, one will ask, “Well, and now what?” And the same could be asked if a person had given himself a private explanation of a word; I mean, if he has said the word to himself and at the same time directed his attention to a sensation.”¹⁴⁶

So the reason why one can’t give oneself a “gift”, in the normal sense of the word, is that certain practical consequences (e.g. transfer of ownership) must ordinarily follow from an action for it to be correctly called a “gift” – and those consequences are absent in the single-person case. However, as with “order”, we sometimes apply the word “gift” in a single-person situation by analogy, for example when we say: “I gave myself the day off” or: “no-one bought it for me, it was a ‘gift to self’”. Those uses are not *incorrect* – we understand them perfectly well – but they are not the ‘normal’ uses (one might say that they are metaphorical rather than literal). Wittgenstein recognises elsewhere that transposing a statement from a two-person situation into a first-person cannot always be done while preserving (ordinary) meaning, for example:

¹⁴⁴ This creates the illusion that one person is here really two people, leading to the confused “time-slice” view. See chapter 5(c) below for more on this.

¹⁴⁵ MS 165, 106f., quoted in Baker & Hacker (2009) p.167.

¹⁴⁶ §268.

“It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking’ and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking.’ (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a single drop of grammar.)”¹⁴⁷

Although Wittgenstein couches this in normative terms, he recognises that “know” and its cognates have a family of uses in different language-games and he is really describing the use of “know” in one of them: the language-game of making knowledge claims.¹⁴⁸ In another language-game, such as that of making jokes, a first-person use of “know” may be correct.¹⁴⁹

In the case of talking, the “further practical consequences” that flow from the use of that word in normal contexts are that the speaker communicates certain things to the hearer, influences the actions of the hearer, and so on. These consequences are clearly lacking in the case of talking to yourself – we can only speak of such consequences in a metaphorical sense. Furthermore, a practical consequence of talking interpersonally is that there is a standard for the correct use of words i.e. whether the hearer understands (knows how to use) those words as the speaker does. There is no such standard in the case of monolinguists. When Wittgenstein posits an explorer who interprets the monolinguists, he introduces a normative standard – but also introduces intersubjectivity.¹⁵⁰ So there is a sense in which a person talking in monologue is using language, but this is a secondary sense – because normativity is lacking.

This conclusion is strengthened by Wittgenstein’s attack on what he calls “the easy transition from some to all”.¹⁵¹ Wittgenstein rejects the suggestion that “What sometimes happens might always happen” as a misunderstanding of the logic (i.e. the grammar) of our expressions.¹⁵² He gives the examples of people sometimes making false moves in a game and sometimes giving orders that are not obeyed; if people always made false moves, and orders were *never* obeyed, then the concepts of “game” and “order” would disintegrate.¹⁵³ Wittgenstein counsels us to avoid this temptation when we consider whether it is conceivable that there be people who only conduct internal monologues:

“...we say that someone talks to himself only if, in the ordinary sense of the words, he *can* talk. And we do not say it of a parrot; or of a gramophone.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ PPF (xi.) §315.

¹⁴⁸ See Garver (1996) p.148.

¹⁴⁹ “It can’t be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I’m in pain.” §247.

¹⁵⁰ §243. One could turn Wittgenstein’s question in §260: “(One can talk to oneself. – Is everyone who speaks when no one else is present talking to himself?)” on its head by asking: Is everyone who speaks when someone is around talking to someone?

¹⁵¹ §344.

¹⁵² §345.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ §344.

We do say of another person that he can “talk to himself”, but we can only apply the word “talk” in this secondary sense if we understand its ‘normal’ sense of talking to other people. And if we talked *only* to ourselves, our concept of ‘talking’ would lose its purpose.¹⁵⁵ As Wittgenstein put it:

“Someone who describes the language of a people describes a uniformity of their behaviour. And someone who describes a language that someone speaks only to himself describes a uniformity of his behaviour, and not something that occurs only once.

But I shall call behaviour ‘speaking a language’ only if it is analogous to ours when we speak our language.”¹⁵⁶

In conclusion then, the monolinguists are conceivable only by making a special, non-standard use of the word “talk” predicated on a similarity to our normal use.

(b) The ‘modality’ objection

The objection here is that the mere description of our language can’t ground an impossibility claim i.e. that language is necessarily social. Boghossian argues that Kripke’s ‘sceptical solution’:

“...can do no more than record the conditions under which speakers in fact consider the attribution of a certain concept warranted and the endorsement of a particular response appropriate.”¹⁵⁷

That is, the ‘sceptical solution’ speaks only of the actual world and says nothing about any other, possible worlds. This being the case, Boghossian claims, we ought to be puzzled as to how it can deliver the conclusion that there could not be a “solitary language”.¹⁵⁸ And Boghossian is, of course, correct; but the really puzzling aspect is why he should think that Wittgenstein was making any such metaphysical claim. Our starting point is that Wittgenstein is explicitly anti-theoretical: he repeatedly disavows any intention to make any positive claims whatsoever.¹⁵⁹ His conception of philosophy is that it can, at most, describe how our (i.e. human) languages work. Wittgenstein’s conception of language is that many of our concepts are characterised by “family resemblances”: they do not have sharp edges, and that it is a mistake to search for their ‘essence’:

¹⁵⁵ §345.

¹⁵⁶ MS 165, 124f., quoted in Baker & Hacker (2009) p.165..

¹⁵⁷ Boghossian (1989) p.155.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Kusch considers this to be an “insurmountable obstacle” to Kripke’s argument (Kusch (2006) p.177).

¹⁵⁹ For example: “...The feeling ‘that it is possible, contrary to our preconceived ideas, to think this or that’ – whatever that may mean – is of no interest to us...And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place.” §109. The extent to which he manages to completely avoid putting forward any philosophical theses is questionable, but his express intentions should nonetheless be our starting point.

““When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition / sentence”, “name” – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? – / What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.””

We’ve already seen in the previous section that Wittgenstein was scornful of possibilities, hypotheses and “image-mongery”. Space unfortunately prevents a detailed examination of Wittgenstein’s later views on logic and logical necessity, but it may perhaps be summed up by:

“Consider: The only correlate in language to an objective necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this objective necessity into a proposition.”¹⁶⁰

This does not mean to say that Wittgenstein thought that our language is totally arbitrary. As we saw in chapter 3(d), our concepts have arisen partly as a result of our circumstances – the general facts about our own human nature and about the environment in which we find ourselves. And Wittgenstein thought that we are able to imagine (to a certain extent,) how, in those facts had been different in certain respects, that might have led to us form different concepts. But he also thought that we have no extra-linguistic grasp of those facts, actual or possible. Our very idea of possibility is bound up with our use of our language – with the concepts that we have, and those sufficiently similar to then that we are capable of thinking about them in our actual language. We simply can’t step outside of our actual language to make metaphysical claims about *any* language, whether or not conceivable by us using our concepts (or ones sufficiently like them).

So to read Wittgenstein as claiming that intersubjectivity is necessary ingredient of any possible language is to miss his point. Wittgenstein’s task is to describe our language i.e. to describe how we use the word “language”. Admittedly, in the remark that Kripke emphasises as embodying the ‘private language argument’ (§202), Wittgenstein appears to make an impossibility claim:

“That’s why ‘following a rule’ is a practice. And to *think* one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that’s why it’s not possible to follow a rule ‘privately’; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it.”

However, once read it the overall context of his later philosophy, it is clear that Wittgenstein is merely connecting the grammar of our word “language” with that of our word “possible”. There is no metaphysical claim here, and McDowell’s objection would not therefore trouble Wittgenstein.

¹⁶⁰ §372. Whilst this put forward as something to consider, Wittgenstein himself clearly endorses it.

(c) *The 'parity' objections*

McDowell and others have argued that intersubjectivity cannot provide the normativity necessary for rule-following and language use because there is a "precise parallel" the individual and 'community' in this regard.¹⁶¹ There are two aspects to this parallel. Firstly, if the individual can't establish a practice, and thereby generate a normative standard, then the 'community' also can't do so. If the individual runs aground because he cannot distinguish between something *seeming* right and its *being* right, then the all that the community can deliver is a communal 'seems right'.

It should be clear by now why this is not a problem. The parallel breaks down because it is predicated on the view of the community as an 'individual writ-large'.¹⁶² This leads to us missing that there is something between the isolated individual and the community as a whole: "the individual within community."¹⁶³ And this person can stand in a normative relation to the community as a whole – his acts may accord with the community's practices or conflict with them. So it is not a problem that the practices cannot themselves be correct or incorrect.¹⁶⁴ Normative arises from within the practice, from the comparison of an individual's acts with those that are considered to be correct or incorrect from the perspective of the practice.

Of course, our practices are not set in stone – we can decide today that what we thought was right yesterday is actually wrong. The history of science is fertile ground for examples of this. Practices are dynamic, our actions change and evolve over time, and new practices emerge as responses to previously unencountered situations. But Wittgenstein's philosophy shows that the concept of a normative standard that is independent of our human activities and practices is unsustainable:

""So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life."¹⁶⁵

This oft-quoted remark of Wittgenstein's has been poorly understood. Many commentators have taken Wittgenstein to be preserving a special, objective role for truth and denying that it amounts to no more than mere agreement.¹⁶⁶ However, on my reading, Wittgenstein's purpose here is to bring

¹⁶¹ McDowell (1984) p.49. Also Blackburn (1984).

¹⁶² See chapter 4.

¹⁶³ Kusch (2006) p.191.

¹⁶⁴ See chapter 3(d).

¹⁶⁵ (§241)

¹⁶⁶ "Wittgenstein explicitly denies that a proposition is true if we accept it or if we find it useful." Glock (1996) p.368; "Human beings agree in the language they use, they agree in what *counts* as applying a given rule (in particular a given explanation of meaning) correctly. Such agreement does not decide what is true and what is false. It determines shared concepts and mutual understanding. But empirical truth is determined by how things are, not by how we agree they are." Baker & Hacker (2005) p.14; "The objection is that Wittgenstein is construing truth as (mere) inter-personal agreement;

us back from the metaphysical to the linguistic. He is reminding us that “true” is a word of our common language, and that we put it to various uses. It is our propositions that are true or false, those propositions are expressed in our language, and whether or not we apply the word “true” to them is also a matter of our language. Blackburn argues that:

“If my community all started saying that $57 + 68 = 5$, this fact does not make me wrong when I continue to assert that it is 125.”¹⁶⁷

But this misses the point that these are all signs in our language, and it is our practices of using them in a regular way that determines their meaning – what counts as their correct and incorrect uses. For example, the expression “ $6 + 4 = 2$ ” is *true* (according to our practice) if we agree that the sign “+” means *minus*.¹⁶⁸ Our practice of using of any particular sign in a particular way is not itself correct or incorrect: normativity only arises from within a practice. There is nothing intrinsic about the shape of the sign “+”, or the sound of the word “plus”, that makes it *correct* for us to use it to denote addition (that is Plato’s *Cratylus* fallacy). Wittgenstein’s point is that we can’t step outside of our language to see if a proposition is really *true*, rather than just what we call “true”. This was the mistake that Wittgenstein fell into in his earlier philosophy:

“*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.5): “The general form of the proposition is: This is how things are.” That is the kind of proposition one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.”¹⁶⁹

A communal ‘seems right’ is, therefore, the best that we can realistically hope for – as the very concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ emerge from, and take their meaning from, our (communal) practices of using them. The second aspect of the supposed parallel is that, if the ‘community’ can generate a normative standard, then a single individual can too. As Blackburn puts it:

“The members of the community stand to each other as the momentary time-slices of an individual do...For when I write the sensation term in my diary I can and will see myself as being faithful to a previous intention to apply it only to a determination range of circumstances.”¹⁷⁰

Wittgenstein’s reply is, in effect, that his claim concerns the conditions for *meaningful* utterances, not the conditions for their truth.” McGinn (1984) p.54.

¹⁶⁷ Blackburn (1984) p.39.

¹⁶⁸ Assuming, of course, that we agree that the other signs in the expression bear their usual meanings.

¹⁶⁹ §114.

¹⁷⁰ Blackburn (1984) p.40. The second sentence is, of course, a reference to Wittgenstein’s famous thought experiment of the ‘private diarist’ in §258.

However, as it is mistaken to think of a community as an ‘individual writ-large’, so also it is misleading to think of an individual as a ‘community writ-small’. A radically isolated individual, like a Tarzan, simply cannot hope to pull himself up by his bootstraps like this. As Wittgenstein put it:

“Certainly I can give myself a rule and then follow it. But is it not a rule only for this reason, that it is analogous to what is called a ‘rule’ in human dealings.”¹⁷¹

In the case of a Tarzan, these human dealings are completely absent – and so the analogy between whatever regular actions it may perform and what we call “following a rule” breaks down.

Conclusions

In this dissertation, I’ve explored the role of intersubjectivity in Wittgenstein’s conception of language by reference to whether Wittgenstein thought that a physically isolated individual (like a Robinson Crusoe) or a radically isolated individual (like a Tarzan) could follow rules. I’ve located these questions within Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy, and explained why they are to be answered through Wittgenstein’s important concept of a practice. I then argued that there are five key characteristics of a practice: that it is a regularity of action, typically brought about by training, which involves understanding the regularity *as a regularity* and intending to conform to it; that it is bound up with normativity, the distinction between correct and incorrect action; and that it partly depends on our (non-epistemic) attitude towards that which is performing the regular actions.

I then applied this conception of a practice to the cases of Crusoe and Tarzan. I argued that we would be prepared to call Crusoe’s actions “following a rule”, but only in so far as he continued to exhibit the requisite regularity, understanding and intention in Crusoe’s behaviour (i.e. empirical matters). However, I also argued that there are insufficient affinities to a practice in Tarzan’s case for us to be entitled to conclude that Tarzan is capable of following rules. In particular, the complex nexus of circumstances in which a practice may emerge are lacking in Tarzan’s case. Starved of social interactions, it is not possible for Tarzan to receive training. And the context in which we could view Tarzan as not only acting in accordance with a rule but *following* it – in which we could see Tarzan as *understanding* the rule and what action is required to conform to it, and *intending* his actions to so confirm – is absent. A real-life Tarzan would simply be too different from us to warrant us applying our concepts of rule-following and language use to it.

Finally, I considered three objections to this position. Firstly, I considered the exegetical argument that Wittgenstein’s remarks on the conceivability of people who spoke only to themselves show that

¹⁷¹ RFM VI-41.

Wittgenstein thought that language is not characteristically social. I suggested that these remarks could not bear the weight that this argument placed on them: that, in the context of these ‘monolinguists’, Wittgenstein was using our concepts of “talking” and “language” in a secondary, metaphorical sense. Secondly, I argued the objection that Wittgenstein’s remarks could not ground the ‘impossibility’ claim that language is necessarily social misunderstands which Wittgenstein was trying to achieve. Wittgenstein was not in the business of making such metaphysical claims but rather, by bringing philosophy back to the humble task of describing how we actually use our language, he sought to dispel philosophical confusion. Finally, I argued that the claim that there is a precise parallel between individual and community is mistaken. It is the fact that an individual (other than a radically isolated one like Tarzan) stands in a relation to a community that enables a practice to emerge in which there is a distinction between correct and incorrect. And “time-slices” of an individual cannot stand in a relation to each other in a similar way, as the context in which regularity can become a normative constraint – a practice – is lacking in the case of an isolated individual.

I do not pretend that the foregoing arguments settle the debate between the ‘individualists’ and ‘communitarians’ decisively in favour of the latter. As Wittgenstein put it:

“These things are finer spun than crude hands have any inkling of.”¹⁷²

However, I have sought to show how my reading of Wittgenstein’s voluminous, extremely subtle, and not always entirely consistent remarks on the purpose and methods of philosophy, and in particular his relentless emphasis on understanding our language and on describing how we use it, support the conclusion that Wittgenstein thought that our language (and rule-following generally) is a characteristically social phenomenon.

¹⁷² *RFM* VII-59.

7. References

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